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SUBJECT: SHARON TELLS CODEL LEVIN NO NEGOTIATIONS WITH PA
UNTIL AFTER GAZA WITHDRAWAL

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

1. (C) SUMMARY: While reaffirming his preference for the roadmap, PM Sharon told Codel Levin on March 14 that he would not "negotiate" with the PA prior to Gaza withdrawal, which he termed a security, not political, solution. Asked what sort of U.S. support he is seeking, the PM said only that he wanted assurances that the GOI would be under no pressure as long as the PA failed to perform on dismantling terrorist infrastructure. Asked whether he would allow Arafat to travel to Gaza after disengagement to help bolster the PA security forces, Sharon said, "Arafat will stay where he is." (In response to the same question, NSA Eiland said, "Maybe.") Sharon pointed to the political obstacles he faces in implementing disengagement, both from the Gaza settlers and from within Likud, where "I've lost the majority in the party I formed." Reinforcing Sharon's point about lack of unity within Likud, FM Shalom told the Codel that he was personally reserving judgment on Gaza withdrawal until details are clearer. Shalom said Sharon would not bring the plan to the Cabinet until "the U.S. contribution is clear." He said the GOI was not necessarily seeking U.S. financial support, but that "statements" would not be sufficient. Sharon, Shalom, Eiland and DMI Chief Farkash all assessed that Hamas will not seek to take over Gaza following Israeli withdrawal, although Farkash warned that motivation for terrorist attacks in the West Bank will increase following Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) In a March 14 meeting interrupted by news of the double suicide bombing in Ashdod, Codel Levin asked PM Sharon about his plan for disengagement from Gaza. The Codel discussed the same topic earlier in the day in separate meetings with FM Shalom, National Security Adviser Eiland and IDF Intelligence Chief MG Farkash. (Codel members were Senators Carl Levin, Jay Rockefeller, Jeff Bingaman, Jack Reed and Frank Lautenberg. The Ambassador and emboffs joined all the meetings.)

Sharon: Negotiations With PA Only After Gaza Withdrawal

3. (C) Sharon told the Codel that the roadmap remains his preferred route for dealing with the Palestinians. Unilateral disengagement, he asserted, does not preclude a roadmap approach because it is a security, not political, "solution." Political negotiations with the PA, however, would only be possible after Israel withdraws from Gaza, not before.

4. (C) Members of the Codel, who had heard FM Shalom say earlier in the day that Sharon would take his withdrawal plan to the Cabinet only after U.S. support for the plan was clear, asked Sharon about the sort of commitments he was seeking from the U.S. Sharon said only that he was looking for assurances that no further pressure would be placed on the GOI as long as the PA is not fulfilling its roadmap obligation to dismantle terrorist infrastructure.

5. (C) Sharon noted the political difficulties he faces in carrying out the disengagement plan. The GOI, he said, has never moved settlements without gaining peace at the same time. Some families have lived for three generations in Gaza, where they have modern farms, as well as painful memories of terrorist attacks. These settlers are reminding the PM that statements he made as a candidate about "painful compromises" all spoke about making the compromises in exchange for a genuine, durable peace.

6. (C) The PM pointed as well to his lack of support for the plan within his own Likud party. Recounting his role in establishing the party during the three months in 1973 between his retirement from the IDF and his return to uniform for the Yom Kippur war, he commented with a smile, "I've lost the majority in the party I formed." Support for the plan on the Left does not offset this loss because the Left is so weak.

7. (C) Responding to questions about Gaza after Israel withdraws, Sharon said he did not expect Hamas to take over. He expressed concern, though, about the Tanzim, which, he said, is responsible for most of the recent terrorism and

which, he said, receives its orders and support from Iran and Hizballah. Asked whether he thought Hamas wanted Israel to leave Gaza, Sharon said he did, but assessed that Hamas is worried that Israel will hit it harder after Israeli withdrawal because the GOI will no longer have to take into account the security of Gaza settlers.

18. (C) Senator Levin asked Sharon whether he would allow Arafat to travel to Gaza after disengagement. Sharon responded firmly that "Arafat will stay where he is," to which Dov Weissglas, the PM's COS, added, "for his own safety."

19. (C) Weissglas commented that he did not foresee Gaza withdrawal having any impact on threats to Israeli security from Gaza. The Gaza fence "works," he said, and the IDF will remain deployed "around" Gaza. The withdrawal will have no impact on terrorist motivation because motivation is "already at the highest level." Elements in Gaza will continue to play the role of the "brains" in terrorist attacks, the "commands" for which emanate in Syria and the execution of which is carried out by residents of the West Bank.

Shalom: Reserving Judgment on Disengagement

10. (C) Like Sharon, FM Shalom opened his discussion of Palestinian issues with the Codel by affirming his support for the roadmap. Asked for his personal view of Sharon's Gaza disengagement initiative, Shalom said he would reserve judgment until its details are clearer. He noted that Sharon has said that the GOI would go ahead with Gaza disengagement only with U.S. support. He also asserted that Sharon would not bring the plan to the full Cabinet until "the U.S. contribution is clear." Pressed by the Codel on the kind of "contribution" sought, Shalom said he did not necessarily mean financial support (although he did not exclude it). He added, however, that U.S. "statements" would probably not be enough.

12. (C) Sen. Rockefeller commented that Congressional interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is waning, given the imperatives of dealing with al-Qaeda and Iraq. He offered his own view of the "inherent intractability" of the Israeli-Palestinian problem, noting that some people believe that no solution is possible as long as Arafat and Sharon are calling the shots. Shalom rejected the implicit comparison between Arafat and Sharon, asserting that Arafat, unlike Sharon, is a terrorist. Unilateral disengagement, he continued, represents a totally new approach that is designed to circumvent the problem of Israel's lack of a Palestinian partner.

13. (C) Sen. Reed noted that Israeli security needs following Gaza withdrawal would seem to require a strong PA, an outcome about which the GOI "seems to be of two minds." Shalom said he agreed with Reed on the need for a strong PA, but thought the PA was not ready or willing to take charge of Gaza security. Egypt, he said, would first have to provide about six months of training to the Gaza security forces. Shalom suggested that the IDF should remain in the Philadelphia Strip along the Gaza-Egypt border after disengagement, in order to avoid both having to reopen the peace treaty with Egypt and facilitating smuggling into Gaza.

Eiland: PA Security Forces Lacking Only Political Will

14. (C) Eiland differed with Shalom on the capabilities of the PA security forces. While they could certainly benefit from training, he commented, they are already strong enough to exercise security control in Gaza. All that is needed is political will, mainly from Arafat. Asked whether the GOI would allow Arafat to travel to Gaza after Israeli disengagement, Eiland said, "Maybe." He noted as well that all GOI assessments concur that Hamas is not interested in taking over Gaza in the short term. The political goal of Hamas is to be strong enough to derail any initiatives that do not suit its purposes.

Farkash: Gaza Withdrawal Means More West Bank Terror

15. (C) Hamas leaders in Gaza and Syria are "negotiating," Gen. Farkash told the Codel, about how Hamas should react to the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. In order to retain its legitimacy on the Gaza street after Israel withdraws, Hamas, he predicted, will look to increase its attacks in the West Bank. Hamas will believe that terrorism can force Israel out of the West Bank, just as terrorism will be seen to have succeeded in Gaza. Terrorist efforts will therefore focus on the West Bank. Summarizing the IDF assessment, Farkash said Gaza disengagement will lead to greater terrorist motivation in the West Bank.

16. (U) The Codel did not have an opportunity to review this cable before departing Israel.

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